

Bing West Statement to the House Armed Services Committee

July 27, 2011

[The Way Ahead in Afghanistan](#)

Full Committee

Rayburn House Office Building - 2118

Mr. Chairman and Committee Members,

It is an honor to appear before this committee. I was an infantryman in Vietnam, later served as assistant secretary of defense and have written several books about combat. On balance, the Afghanistan news is tentatively positive.

- Where we have been. According to US counterinsurgency doctrine, our soldiers and marines were expected to be “nation-builders.” Afghanistan, however, was the wrong war for that strategy of democratic nation building - for three reasons.

First, a foreign power cannot build a democratic nation, while having no control over that nation’s authoritarian leaders. In 2002, the US and the UN handed full sovereignty to Afghan leaders who proved to be venal and selfish. We conceded all leverage over Afghan leadership. That was a fatal mistake.

Second, a duplicitous Pakistan has maintained a 1500-mile long sanctuary. The recent decision to give Pakistan money only on a transactional basis – do this if you want to be paid – is commendable. It will influence behavior, because Pakistani officials cannot maintain their comfortable life styles without American money.

Third, our benign counterinsurgency strategy did not win the commitment of the people. In Iraq, the Sunni tribes did eventually reject the insurgency. In Afghanistan, the Pashtun tribes have not done so. Most Pashtun villagers survive by being chameleons; they expect the Taliban to return.

By giving away \$18 billion over ten years, we created a culture of entitlement. Afghans from President Karzai down to village elders came to expect that we would fight for them and give them money. The US military alone undertook 16,000 economic projects, as if its mission was that of a giant Peace Corps. This money resulted in no change in the war; however, it did weaken the willingness of Afghans to rely upon themselves. When you give something for nothing, you receive nothing in return.

- Where are we today. Our fundamental national security goal has already been achieved - and can be sustained. That goal is preventing a terrorist safe haven inside Afghanistan. Today, no such safe haven is possible, due to our Special Operations raids, a network of spies and our astonishing airborne surveillance and electronics. A small US force with those capabilities can

prevent a safe haven indefinitely, as long as the Afghan army controls the cities and highways. This approach is sometimes called 'counterterrorism', as distinct from counterinsurgency.

- **Where we are going.** The outcome depends upon one dominant factor: the cohesion of the Afghan Army. A collapse of the Afghan Army is the only Taliban route to Kabul. Hence the spirit and leadership of the Afghan Army dwarf all other concerns.

A few days ago, General John R. Allen took command in Afghanistan - the tenth American commander in ten years. He will be the first commander to focus primarily upon placing Afghan forces in the lead, rather than having American troops fight the war for them. Allen is a keen student of history who has studied the role of General Creighton Abrams, our commander in Vietnam forty years ago. What was then called "Vietnamization" can today be called "Afghanization."

Like General Abrams, General Allen understands his central task. Afghanistan is not large-scale combat; instead it is a war of intimidation - brief fights and bombings intended to instill fear, causing the Afghan troops to pull back. Allen will take steps, like deploying more advisers, to infuse the Afghan soldiers with a sense of confidence. Advisers provide the transition out of Afghanistan. Currently, there is one American soldier for every two Afghan soldiers. Gradually that ratio must change to one American adviser for every ten Afghan soldiers.

The harder task is changing Afghan Army leadership. There is a tribal skein to promotions that we do not understand. Every adviser team can tell you who are the poor Afghan officers. But the US has scant influence in selecting Afghan military leaders.

What can Congress do to help? Congress has been unstinting in its support of our troops, in pay, equipment, care and genuine concern. In addition, I would offer two suggestions.

First, enhance leverage by the power of the purse. The US should pay the Afghan Army without going through corrupt ministries in Kabul. In return for authorizing this pay, Congress should insist that General Allen's command have an institutional voice in promotions - and firings - at the Afghan battalion level and above, including district police chiefs. President Karzai is certain to object, but it is American taxpayer money, not Karzai's.

Second, Congress should determine what level of Afghan Army aid is sustainable. After 2014, international aid will plummet and, as a consequence, Afghanistan will be a political and economic mess. That is unfortunate but tolerable, as long as the Afghan army remains intact.

When our forces left South Vietnam in 1973, Congress slashed the budget for the South Vietnamese army and disaster followed. Conversely, if our commander in Afghanistan can assure the Afghan army of modest resources for the long term - if he is the conduit - then he retains enormous leverage over the selection of Afghan army leaders. He who has the gold, rules.

I'm not advocating more spending; we are broke as a country. The current bill for the Afghan forces is over ten billion dollars. While that must be reduced, the Afghan Army must remain

confident of US support. I suggest that our elected officials and policymakers consider a tradeoff: that is, reducing some current economic and military projects in return for placing, say, \$25 billion for the Afghan army in a lockbox for 2015 and beyond. Thank you.